

Comparisons of Performance Practice for a Troubadour Song and a Sequence

I here compare four recordings of Beatriz de Dia's "A chantar m'er" and three recordings of Hildegard's "Ave generosa." My comparisons indicate that for "A chantar," interpretations differ very markedly, while, for "Ave generosa," performance practice is perhaps less susceptible to variation. Between performances, differences in instrumentation, rhythm, melody, and other elements can often be explained by (i) differing scholarly interpretations of how to read and accompany twelfth-century music; (ii) multiple ways of embellishing scores that lack written instrumental parts; (iii) personal opinions of what sounds good; (iv) expediency in performance, or (v) conflicts between extant manuscripts.

"A chantar m'er," the only surviving notated example of a troubairitz song, sets a poem in which Beatriz laments her unrequited love. I compare recordings by Estampie [3] (abbreviated **E**), Elizabethan Conversation [2] (**EC**), the Martin Best Mediaeval Ensemble [6] (**MB**), and Sinfonye [10] (**S**).

The most striking differences between these interpretations lie in their instrumentation and accompanimental patterns. In the recording **E**, a woman sings over a persistent hurdy-gurdy drone, with a lute (the long-necked *saz*) accenting certain syllables and playing interludes between verses. Between the third and fourth verses is a lengthy interlude involving hurdy-gurdy, lute, and percussion – this is motivic and does not imitate the melody of the singer. **EC** features a soprano

who is doubled throughout by a fiddle, with a lute that is most audible between verses. **MC**'s interesting performance includes a rebec drone, over which the full melody is played first by a lute and then by a flute. While the flute plays, a man recites two verses of the poem, in English translation, following which the flute and lute play the melody together with nakers and a rebec drone. As for the performance in **S**, there is simply a solo female voice.

The extreme variation in instrumental interpretations among these performances is made possible by the fact that troubadour songs such as "A chantar" have not come down to us with notated instrumental parts, yet some research suggests that they were performed with accompaniment. Performing groups attempting to recreate instrumental accompaniment have many choices for period instruments, and also the choice of how to use the instruments. A drone almost always sounds good and imparts a folk style to the piece. Imitation of the melody has the advantage that no modern melody is being added, while freely composed instrumental parts can be more effective as accompaniment.

The recordings **E** and **EC** hence are likely attempts to create an authentic accompaniment to the piece, possibly also influenced by regard for dramatic effect. I find it difficult to believe that **MC** was at attempt at being authentic, with its recited, translated, abridged poem; I treat it as a dramatic adaptation of "A chantar" that is intended to fit well within an album of chivalric songs. (That the poem is delivered by a man, not a woman, might also be due to album considerations.)

The interpretation **S** is interesting. Its director, Stevie Wishart, writes this in the liner notes [13]:

The refrain-based [examples of troubadour] songs with their catchy melodies are set off well against drones and are particularly associated with instrumental participation. By contrast, ... more elusive melodies and extended, highly expressive texts such as *A chantar m'er*, ... invite a more intimate rendition by the voice alone.

The performance **S** was recorded in 1987, just at the time when much of mediaeval music, which had previously been performed largely with significant instrumental accompaniment, was being reinterpreted *a cappella* (see [5]). It is therefore not, perhaps, surprising to find a solo voice performance in **S**, though it is interesting that the texture may have been motivated by the particular qualities of “A chantar.”

Other differences between the performances are worth noting. “A chantar” is strophic, with five verses and a concluding couplet. In **E**, the fourth verse is omitted, perhaps due to time constraints. In the **MC** adaptation, only the first and fourth verses are recited. In **EC**, the final couplet is delivered as a recitation while the fiddle plays the melody. This works to good effect, emphasizing that this final couplet is a kind of concluding moral.

The performances agree generally with the melody presented in [9]. They demonstrate irregular rhythms, neither treating all notes as necessarily equal in length nor holding syllables for the same length of time (two common interpretations of chant). Some groups of tied notes are treated as ornamentations, while other ornamentations (akin to grace notes) are occasionally added, especially by **EC** near the ends of lines. Since note durations are not notated in troubadour songs, this rhythmic freedom, in accordance with the patterns of the text, is unsurprising.

The key in which “A chantar” is sung differs dramatically between performances. While the score in [9] starts the piece on an A, the starting notes for **E**, **EC**, **MC**, and **S** are, respectively, D, B flat, B natural, and B natural. These differences may be based on performer preference.

I now consider “Ave generosa,” a sequence composed by Hildegard of Bingen, which praises and tells the story of the Virgin Mary using ecstatic and somewhat erotic imagery. The recordings I consider are by Gothic Voices [4] (**GV**), Oxford Camerata [7] (**OC**), and Virelai [12] (**V**). None of these includes instrumental accompaniment. This is not surprising, since chant is believed to have been sung at this time with accompaniment, except perhaps for a drone from a hurdy-gurdy or an organ.

While **GV** and **V** are sung simply by solo (female) voice, the **OC** recording uses a group of three or four women for verses 1, 4, 5, and 7 and, in verses 2, 3, and 6, a solo female voice over a wordless monotone sustained by the other women. This interpretation is fitting given the text of “Ave generosa”; verses 2, 3, and 6 are particularly rich with metaphor and are also narrative, while verses 1, 4, and 7 are more akin to paeans. It makes sense to let a soloist tell the story and present imagery while letting the group sing the praises of Mary.

There are two extant original scores of “Ave generosa,” one from Rupertsberg and the other from Dendermonde Abbey. There are three notes of the melody which differ between the two scores, and there is one note which is missing in Rupertsberg. The score found in [8] combines the two scores, using the Rupertsberg but inserting the note found only in the Dendermonde. It is interesting that all three recordings follow this composite score.

Liquescents seem to be treated in all three productions as regular notes. Quilismas, by contrast, are interpreted in different ways, with **OC** ignoring them but **GV** and **V** treating them as tremolos. **OC**’s interpretation makes sense given the disagreement between scholars as to what quilismas signify, while the interpretation of **GV** and **V** fits with Christopher Page’s (as expressed in [8]), which is not surprising in the case of **GV** as the production is directed by Page.

Rhythmic patterns vary between the recordings. In **GV** and **V**, each note is held for about the same length, following one scholarly interpretation for how chant was originally sung. In **OC**, notes are held for varying lengths, in particular with groups of tied notes on the same syllable often sung more quickly. This more free rhythm may suit Hildegard's ecstatic verses. As in "A chantar," pitch levels vary between performances. Even **GC**'s production, directed by Page, is not on the same pitch level as Page's score [8].

In conclusion, we find that performances of the troubairitz song "A chantar" vary greatly, especially in their instrumental arrangements, whereas performances of the sequence "Ave generosa" are much more similar, with slight differences in number of vocalists and score interpretation.

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